



Statement in Opposition to Proposed HB 5127 and HB 5128

Dr. Sandra E. Nordmark, Legislative Director

The Michigan Farmers Union, a statewide non-industrial family farm and rural community advocate since 1923, opposes passage of House Bills 5127 and 5128.

Our first concern is for the sweeping effect the proposed legislation would have in diminishing the value of non-industrial agriculture voices at the table with regard to animal welfare, environmental impact, and public choices. Too much power has been vested in the very industry that would be regulated to design not only the conditions under which it would agree to be held accountable, but to influence program guidelines and fiscal apportionment that would manage and pay for program costs.

There needs to be a broader representation on the Advisory Council, which would seat interest groups unrelated to food animal welfare, such as fruit and vegetable processors, food retailers and restaurateurs, in the guise of food safety, not animal welfare, which is supposedly the focus of these bills. At the same time, such logical choices as an organic livestock farmer, a bioethicist, a small family farmer, particularly from amongst the state's many minority farmers, have been left out. Allowing the regulated community to list the only two animal industry representatives is too biased, too narrow. If food safety assurances ARE a part of this legislative intent, then certainly representatives from a consumer advocacy group and an environmental organization must be at the table as well.

The issue of audits fosters too close a relationship between regulated and regulator. Audits as practiced in horticultural production are not comparable to an on-site inspection by a qualified state inspector. E.g., audits don't determine if apple trees are getting enough water, or if grape vines are too crowded----what will an "audit" of flocks and herds tell us? The audits will not be FOIA-able and there is limited transparency in the finding of noncompliance, secrecy no other sector of the food system enjoys. Therefore, the audit system proposed lacks accountability, credibility and usefulness.

The costs of running this unfunded mandate will be extraordinary if all 30,000 livestock farmers in Michigan to be assessed fees-for-service are included without exemption, even for the Amish community where access may be uncertain. In the absence of cost factors, and no plans to ask for general fund monies, as yet, MDA's start-up costs of training and certifying the "auditors" and providing program oversight is unknown and uncertain.

For these reasons and others, we feel the non-industrial family farmer will be unfairly taxed by this program, similar to the results of the recent preferential fees awarded to large livestock operations over smaller ones for animal ID. Working out program details after vague legislation is passed is poor public policy. We therefore strongly urge that you vote "NO" on these versions of HB 5127 and HB 5128.